

AMERICAN ART

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HOW IT CAN BE MADE TO
FLOURISH

BY

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I

THERE IS VERY LITTLE OF IT

When I reflect on the words American Art, many things come into my mind; such, for example, as tableware, cutlery, table linen, chairs and tables; draperies and wall papers; houses, churches, banks, office buildings and railway stations; medals and statues; books, journals, signs and posters; lamp-posts and fountains; jewelry, silverware, clocks and lamps; carpets and rugs; laces, embroideries and ribbons; vases and candlesticks; etchings, engravings, drawings,—and paintings.

Then I ask myself, do we in America, when we make these things, commonly give them that indescribable touch which turns each of them into an object of art, an

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object, that is, which gives continuing pleasure to discriminating persons of experience in such matters? And I answer my question by saying, no.

Though we are very numerous, very prosperous and very rich; though we spend millions on education and on the whole are perhaps the most competent people on earth, we do not yet produce much that the calm observer may call beautiful. We buy our objects of art from other countries; we educate our artists in other countries; we borrow designs for decorating almost everything we make, or we import foreign-made designers; and for an art journal we steal a corner of one published in England, call the whole thing international to hide the theft, and publish none of our own worthy of the name.

Do I say there is no American art? By no means. I say that of art objects pure and simple, of our own make, and of objects made beautiful by the application of ornament of our own designing and applied by

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our own artisans, we produce, in spite of our numbers, prosperity and wealth, very, very few.

II

WHY THERE IS SO LITTLE AMERICAN ART

I have hinted at what I include in the term American Art. Before attempting to make that statement clearer, let me say that there are sufficient reasons for our failure to produce more than a few art objects which are worthy of note. The reasons are simply these, (1) we are too busy, and (2) our rich buy art objects elsewhere!

We are rather energetic. We began life with a picked lot of stiff-necked and rebellious people, people who found irksome the curbs that the conventions of their old home put on them and were quite ready and willing to accept hardships and serious toil if they could thereby win a living and meanwhile be free of those curbs. Even to this day our numbers are almost hourly recruited

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by those who have chafed under the discipline of ancient circumstance and have come here ready to be tireless in accomplishment, if only they can acquire. We are born, that is, to wish to do,—if thereby we can earn. Nature has set a very fertile country here before us, and we are now busily at work therein, with quite admirable results.

III

PLAY AND ART

We have at last put our affairs in such good order that we can spare a little time for play. But a people may take quite freely of recreation and still not find itself ready for the enjoyment and patronage of art. Play represents the agreeable release of certain surplus energy; art appreciation seems to represent the agreeable release of certain rather definitely-trained surplus emotions.

The surplus energy is ours by reason of our nature, our high standard of living and

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our abundant and easily conquered resources. The surplus emotions are perhaps ours also; but it has not yet occurred to us so to train them that their exercise will give us deep and varied pleasures.

Our rich and learned, and especially the women of the rich and learned class, can spare time and strength for the opera, but hardly for a discriminating study of music. They can find time for visits to an art museum when such visits are the mode; but not for the development of their esthetic sense by the careful study of any of the thousands of classes of objects there displayed. They can find time for art lectures at a club; but not to read a sound book on any art topic, or to collect with discretion and taste art objects of any kind.

We seem to have been born with the work habit, and with endless opportunity and some press of need for its exercise; we are acquiring the play habit as our gains begin to outrun our needs; but we have slight leanings yet toward that art habit

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which calls for a careful training of our unexpended fund of feelings. This is not because we are less artistic than other peoples; but because we have not had time and inclination to give heed to objects of art.

IV

ARTISTS AND ARTISANS ARE HERE, BUT ARE NOT PAID TO PRODUCE

Among us, as among all other peoples, a few men and women are born with the desire to spend their lives in acquiring high skill in some craft and in applying that skill to the production of useless objects of beauty and the adornment of objects of daily use. These persons are born and live among us; but, while the consummate genius among them may survive and prove his powers in spite of lack of support and sympathy, the most of them are either never stimulated to serious endeavor, or are never aroused to an appreciation of their talent by any atmosphere of art patronage that we supply.

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V

GENIUS AND TALENT REMAIN HIDDEN UNTIL THEY ARE CALLED FORTH

Some say there never was a mute, inglorious Milton; that all high talent inevitably finds its way to accomplishment. But can we believe that if we gave as loud and insistent a call, and one as profitable to those who answer it, for sculpture, or for autumn landscapes in oil, or for tapestries, or for porcelains, as we have given in recent years for automobiles, we would not have found an ample response from men and women of notable talent? The rich among us have, in recent years, spent many millions for paintings by foreign painters and for rare and ancient curios of other lands. Had that money been offered for worthy products of native talent, would not the worthy products have appeared? No one can give any sound reason for believing they would not. It is easy to show by example that they would.

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VI

THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE CAME WHEN IT WAS PAID TO COME

The rich and powerful leaders of men and affairs in Italian cities four hundred and five hundred years ago, found that they must mark themselves as a distinct and superior class, not merely by showing that they possessed high intellectual powers through their conduct of war and affairs, but also by a certain display of wealth. They found that to hold their standing as persons peculiarly blessed by providence, as notoriously good, great and noble, they must do certain things and possess certain things, the doing of which and the possession of which would be accepted as honorific by the common people. They acted upon this conclusion, just as have all of the groups of rich, great and powerful men of historic times. They demanded palaces for homes. They took up pastimes which only the rich and powerful could take part in. They acquired

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rich and costly clothing. They built and endowed churches and erected elaborate and costly shrines and altars. They made collections of paintings, marbles, bronzes and curios of a thousand kinds. Some of these things they could cause to be brought from other countries, and those thus obtained, especially if rare, costly, and unobtainable by others, acquired thereby an added honoring power. For to the desire to do and to possess things which gave them distinction in the eyes of the populace, was added the desire to outdo their wealthy and powerful rivals in the pursuit of that same distinction.

Thus far the case of the Italian aristocrats runs parallel with that of our own. Here and today the wealthy are impelled, first, to distinguish themselves from the common, poorer people by conspicuous consumption and conspicuous waste and, next, to outdo their equals in wealth by the acquisition of costly and curious objects, so rare that their colleagues in wealth can not acquire the counterparts thereof.

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The use of wealth in enhancing distinction has followed a like custom with Italian noble and rich American.

But, the former found that the supply of honor-bringing curios was small and its source remote. He was compelled soon to call on the people of his own country to create those elaborate labor-consuming products which he needed to serve as stigmata of social distinction. He asked for tapestries, silks, wood-carvings, iron work, bronzes, silverware, jewelry and a thousand other things. He insisted that these be larger, finer, more costly, more bizarre, more glorious and more labor-consuming and skill-demanding than those his rivals, in the search for honor-bringing possessions, had yet discovered and acquired. These were not to be found in the east or in France; or, if found, were not sufficient in number or were not precisely suited to the special needs of his own person or his own palace. He proceeded straightway to command Italian artists and Italian artisans to produce them,

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and the renaissance in fine arts was forthwith on its way.

VII

THE AMERICAN RENAISSANCE IS NOT EVEN
COURTEOUSLY INVITED TO APPEAR

With us the conditions are far different. Our rich find an ample supply of honorific curios in the relics of European and Asiatic civilizations. They buy the Barbizon painting and the Gothic shrine; they enrich the forger and they rifle the ancient temple. Modern methods of trade and transportation bring within range of their purses the choicest of the remains of a dozen civilizations, in each of which conditions like those in Italy in 1500 persuaded genius and skill to produce art objects in countless curious forms.

Indeed, so ample is the supply of honor-bringing curios that the race for distinction in art patronage, between our very rich, long since ceased to be one of taste and has become one merely of length of purse.

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Meanwhile it is not as it was in Italy with artists and artisans. They were commanded to produce, and at times the commands were even guided by a discriminating taste. Here our artists and artisans are continuously ignored. Their products are not needed as prizes in the race for distinction in curio-acquisition; genius, talent and patiently acquired skill are not called forth, and America has neither artists nor artisans and — there is very little American art!

VIII

OUR VIEW OF WHAT IS ART IS MUCH TOO NARROW

Returning to the things that the phrase American art brings to mind, I would say that I named them because I wish to show that we habitually take far too narrow a view of the art field.

Most of us like to work. But work does not exhaust the possibilities of enjoyment;

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and idling has large and continued possibilities of pleasure only for the unfortunate few. Play has narrow limits to its powers of pleasing. Only by making a game serious and letting it ape the manners of a task can we long tolerate it; and, lacking productive or creative features, it does not, even when masked as labor, long entirely satisfy. But our nature is such that, even after we have brought body and brain measurably near to the point of exhaustion either by work or by play masquerading as work, we still have on hand a surplus of feeling. This surplus we can, if we will, use for the production of high and simple pleasures in the contemplation of what, for lack of a better phrase, we call objects of art.

I venture to restate the thought in other words: To get the maximum out of this short life we must take delight in our feelings. We can work, and win in the race, and add house to house and land to land; but, if we do not at the same time have the daily and hourly pleasure of alert and

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intelligent response to the fine and delicate and thoughtful and genius-born design, ornament and decoration which are always before us, then we live only a fraction of the life it is possible to live.

Granted that there are degrees among us as to the possibilities of cultivating this emotion. Some can delight gloriously in a bit of machine-made moulding in the jamb of a door or the sill of a window, if they find its curves evince thought and refined taste in the one who designed it; while some are unmoved even before a splendid bronze or a glowing canvas.

IX

THE OIL PAINTING FETISH

But in general this is true, that life is measured by its thrills. His good day's work, his game well played, and, the art that genius sets before him—each of these should furnish delights, and the latter can give

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easily the most, and some of the deepest, and some of the most lasting.

Now genius sets art before us in many forms. One of these forms, painting, has long received more than its due share of attention. Few men of art genius have the especial genius for painting. The number of good paintings produced in a generation is consequently small; being much in demand they are high in price and are bought only by the wealthy. The result is that few can see good paintings save by making visits to a distant museum.

If it is true that it is well to broaden and enrich life by agreeable reactions, and that these may best be acquired by educating ourselves to respond eagerly when we look upon objects of art; then it is also true that we should learn how to secure those reactions in and by the presence of objects of art which are of less rarity and of less cost than paintings.

In other words, if you wish to get all the enjoyment that your capacities permit out

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of the beautiful creations of your fellow men, you must learn to see and feel the beauty that lies in the good engraving, etching, tapestry, bronze, wood-carving, chair, table, lace, moulding, facade and countless other objects of pure or applied art.

X

THE STUDY OF AMERICAN ART DEFINED

To learn to know and feel this beauty in every-day objects which have been produced in America, this is to study American Art. It is not to read works on esthetics or on the history of art production; though such reading may prove entertaining and even helpful in your study proper. It is not, save in slight degree, to make an occasional pilgrimage to an art gallery; though this may be worth while if only to enable you to keep up with that conversational procession in which at times we all must march. It is not to parade with guide book, guide or professional esthete through the art

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galleries of Europe; though this may give us some of the peace that comes with consciousness of duty done.

It is, first, to observe with care one or several of the many classes of objects which our artists and artisans are producing and trying to make beautiful in line, form, arrangement and color; to observe them with care; to decide if, regardless of price, they please a little, or much, or not at all; to learn of their many kinds; of the manner of their making; of the skill that goes into their production; of the changes they have undergone in their development, and, finally, always finally, to learn what is said of them by those competent to speak thereon.

XI

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING INTERESTED AND CRITICAL

In art matters it is more important to be sensitive than to be knowing: it is better worth while to feel that a thing is right, for you, and to get pleasure with the feeling,

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than it is to know who made it and when, where it was made and under what conditions, who has owned it, who now owns it, what he paid for it, and what great critics have said of it.

If you cultivate your sensibilities by the keen observation and careful criticism of every-day, familiar objects, you cultivate thereby the whole esthetic side of your nature almost as effectively—and in view of the multiplicity of opportunities which these ever-present objects offer, even more effectively, and certainly more rapidly,—than by the observation, for example, of the world's masterpieces of painting.

At the bottom of all visual arts are certain elements—line, form, arrangement, let us say;—which may be studied in the simple pen-and-ink sketch which appears in a monthly journal or in the cup which serves its humble purpose on the breakfast table, almost as well as in the facade of a cathedral, in the glory of a splendid painting, or in the glow of an ancient porcelain.

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XII

ART STUDY SHOULD BE DOMESTICATED

Furthermore, if you school yourself with moderate effort to look for beauty, and for ugliness also,—for it is in seeing both the wrong and the right in art objects that emotional discipline and art culture come—if you look with care for the good and the ill in the objects that lie about you daily, you do it without the distractions that encompass you on a visit to a gallery of art. For here you are conscious of ten thousand votes already cast in praise of what you see, and you cannot set your judgment free of them. You see with others' eyes, not with your own. Even if you dare be true to yourself and secretly admit your failure to find the pleasure that others find in a Monet or a Cezanne or an Italian primitive, you probably have not the courage of expression; and you come away, not more acutely sensitive to good painting, but simply more skilful in pretence.

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And again, even if you are able to look at a painting, fair and true, and to say to yourself that, regardless of the world's judgment, this and that are what you find in it to add to your enjoyment, you quite probably are so taken up with what the painting tells, what sort of a person the painter of it was, how he looked and what his morals were, when he lived and where, and, especially, how much the painting cost, that, hedged in by questions of morals, history, biography and finance, you have no fair look whatever at the painting itself.

The study of American Art, then, the study of how to develop one's appreciation and enjoyment of American-made art objects, properly begins with the collection, the careful study, the critical observation of all objects of art—and they not necessarily the best—which are made in America.

One need not complain that American art is a mere copy of the art of other countries, for art is always largely a copy of what has preceded it, plus the something which

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makes it art. One need not lament the lack of sincerity in American art and its contrast in that respect with the art, for example, of the Italian renaissance; for the sincerity is not lacking now and here and was not notably present in the days of Raphael.

The thesis here laid down is simply this:—art has a wider field and therefore offers more possibilities of pleasure than most of us have realized. We in America have not produced much good art because we have been too busy adjusting a growing colony to a new land, and because our rich acquire distinction in curios bought in other countries. We can best study art to the end of becoming sensitive to it, which means becoming esthetic, by observing it and criticizing it; and especially in all its more familiar forms.

XIII

HOW TO BECOME PATRONS OF AMERICAN ART

If what I have ventured to affirm is true it is easy to learn from it how we may

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promote American art; how we may become worthy and helpful patrons of it in the best sense of that word.

The formula is very simple: first, we must buy it; next we must study it; next, we must criticize it, adversely where we feel compelled; and, finally, we must praise it where we can.

In buying, with the patronage of art in view, we must of course discriminate. To be able to discriminate to good purpose, to the end that we may encourage the serious and accomplished artist, and, by neglect, discourage the pretender, we must seriously study our subject. Unless one is rarely gifted and has an intuitive knowledge of what is fine and sound and wholesome and enduring in all departments of art,—and very few are so gifted,—one must select a narrow field, study it, master it as far as ability and opportunity permit, become in it an expert, or better, become in it what we may call, to render freely the French phrase, an honest amateur.

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XIV

THE GREAT OBSTACLE TO BECOMING AN HONEST ART PATRON

Now, if any chance to feel tempted to take up art in this simple, honest, every-day sense and, holding themselves in all other fields to the acquisition of objects of the simplest and most frankly utilitarian kind, devote themselves to one special field, inform themselves concerning it, buy objects in it with some freedom, always expecting to learn from each purchase how to select more wisely for the next one,—if any do this with the hope of becoming one of the blessed and ever-joyful company of honest amateurs, they will find at least one serious obstacle to progress.

This obstacle is the result of the combination of some of the factors already spoken of: our native energy and our natural resources. These have worked together to make us, as it were, wealthy before our deserts. There is, no doubt, a time for riches;

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but it were well for art if that time did not so often come so soon. With us the power of acquisition has outpaced the growth of capacity for appreciation and enjoyment. We like to get things; but, having them, it often happens that the only form of enjoyment in them that occurs to us is, to show them. To put it in another way, our mental and esthetic equipment is not up to the level of our wealth. We have been so busy sowing and hoeing and garnering in nature's garden that we have not taken time to practice intensive agriculture on our own intellects. As a nation we are as smart as we think we are, I guess; surely we are not as wise.

XV

A DEFINITE SUGGESTION FOR ART PATRONAGE

The phrase which describes quite well the obstacle to that art study and art patronage which I have recommended is "spendthrift

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mediocrity." It denotes a national tendency. It does not make for the promotion of good art.

Abundant suggestions are at hand for guidance in the task of patronizing American art. Here is one:

Study your tea-cups. The drinking vessel of every-day use is an object on which those endowed with the creative art faculty have spent time, care, labor and high skill for many thousands of years. It has taken a million forms and has been adorned in a million ways. The whole field of drinking vessels is too large for anyone to attempt to master; but the tea-cup of today, as made in America, and better still as made in America in the last ten years, would be an object about which one might hope in time to learn something.

To study art as exemplified in tea-cups of today, may sound a trivial suggestion. Surely it is not. It can open up the wide topics of line, form, color and arrangement, and help one to become discriminating in all

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art fields, if one has capacity for discrimination. Remember, also, that if even a few only of our citizens were to give time, thought and a modicum of money to the purchase and study of present day tea-cups, the designers in our potteries would know it and would be encouraged thereby. These designers must chiefly design what will appeal to spendthrift mediocrity; but that is not the kind of work for which inspired designers feel they are born; and for them to learn that even a few of their fellows have determined to master the elements of good taste as they may be exemplified in the products of their skill, will give them encouragement akin to that which the nobles gave to artists and artisans in Florence 500 years ago.

Art has always flourished where it was asked to flourish, and never elsewhere. If we wish for a renaissance of art in America we must be students and patrons of endeavors which seem humble, but are in truth of the utmost importance, here at home. If

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American art does not flourish it will not be because we are too rich, or unduly sordid, or insincere; but because we refuse to become discriminating patrons of the every-day good things our fellow citizens can produce if a kindly interest stimulate them thereto.

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